

Nimitz while an armada of four hundred B-29s roared across an overcast sky--the surrender of the Japanese High Command to General MacArthur and his entourage on the forward deck of the battleship Missouri.

#

[End Chapter Three Part Two]

After watching the surrender ceremony and listening to the band "March On, Japan" accounts of his significance. MacArthur's commandment placed the rest of the troops in leading their gear and disembarking onto landing craft that headed towards the beach. At the shallow the men jumped in to help unload and remove. Heavy water the weight of his equipment, stumbled and fell backward into the water. As he staggered up to the beach, screaming and swearing, he saw that the troops were being greeted by an unexpected presence.

There was a reception committee of about ten Japanese civilians all lined up very nervously and wearing American army uniforms, green uniforms and yellow pants and red scarves and blue hats. All men. All of attention. They looked like a reception committee from the mayor's office, and turned out to be peace over specimens. Monthly 2/2/45/

The Marines had landed near the tip of a sleeping mountain and had reached down almost to witness their own part about of this peninsula's end, guarding the coast.

[CHAPTER THREE]

Part Three

i

After watching the surrender ceremony and listening to the Armed Forces Radio accounts of its significance, Norman's reconnaissance platoon joined the rest of the troop in loading their gear and disembarking onto landing craft that headed towards the beach. At the shallows the men jumped in to wade ashore and Norman, clumsy under the weight of his equipment, stumbled and fell backward into the water. As he staggered up to the beach, streaming and swearing, he saw that the troop was being greeted by an unexpected presence:

There was a reception committee of about ten Jap civilians all lined up very correctly and wearing American zoot suits, green coats and yellow pants and red neckties and Jap hats. All neat, all at attention. They looked like a reception committee from the mayor's office, and turned out to be press correspondents. [family 9/4/45]

The Americans had landed near the tip of a sweeping, mountainous arm that reaches down almost to enclose Tokyo Bay; just short of this peninsula's end, guarding the channel that

protects the great Bay from the sea, sits the modest town and harbor of Tateyama. This town area, with its adjoining military air base and coast-guarding piers, was to be garrison for Norman and his regiment during the first season of his stay in Japan. The 112th moved into a cluster of recently abandoned Japanese army barracks, scrubbing, scouring and sweeping in exactly the way that they would always do wherever they went, and with the usual lack of reference to their larger human location. "It's hard," -Norman noted ruefully to his family on his third day ashore, "to believe you're anyplace but in the army. Even the Lamaseries of Tibet would be dull in the army[ibid.]"

It is, of course, quite possible that this levelling routine, humdrum as it no doubt was, served a certain purpose. Considering the fact that a bare month before, Norman and his fellows were training for a Japanese invasion action that promised casualty figures even greater, it may be, than the ones they had imagined, and considering that the Japanese population was still reeling from the concussion of bombings so savage as to transfix the world's imagination for the following fifty years, it may have been just as well that for a while both the occupiers and the occupied should nourish their imaginations on the plainest possible diet. In any case there was nothing war-torn about Tateyama, which had been spared the bombings, and whose airstrip was already in use for light-plane traffic.

Norman soon proceeded out on routine assignment with the

112th Headquarters recon platoon, exploring in jeeps for navigable roads ("a northwest passage") through the beautiful mountain range that divided the Tateyama bay-side of the southward sweeping Boso-Hanto peninsula from the Pacific ocean-side. The cool, brilliantly clear Japanese air revealed both a topography and a society to engage his gradually awakening perceptions, and Norman began to record his discoveries with quick enthusiasm. Driving up the Pacific shore, through villages, "I saw an old woman grinding some meal in a great stone bowl in the middle of a stone floor. The action seemed a thousand years old, and the village as something out of the middle ages." The country transfixed him as much as the people, and he told how the hills facing the Pacific "become very steep here and drop in long, fearful plunges down to the ocean." He registered his excitement to see how "the little fishing villages, cramped and fearful on the narrow ledge of beach," were built of light-hued stone whose "colors were grays and lavenders and dark greens," and how the "the magnificent contrast of a contorted wrathful earth" created a "palette of color-tones as striking as anything I've ever seen."

A spot that struck him--even more powerfully, as he said, than Provincetown--offered a twin-peaked hill of great, steep rock some two hundred feet out from shore. He told Bea that "in a saddle between the fifty foot peak and the one hundred foot one was a little shack, looking out to sea. I cannot imagine a more perfect place to write a book, or when the tide is high, to make

love on the ocean side and know you'll never be disturbed.[nb9/11/45]" Norman's sense of being in a place of discovery, where he could sharpen his senses by coming alive to the unexpected and the new, supplied him with a stabilizing element that he would draw upon over and over again during his stay in Japan. He swam in the Tateyama bay almost daily, gathering shells and writing descriptions that he sent home to Bea, declaring within a matter of weeks that he loved the country and "the steady source of pleasure" that it gave him[nb9/16/45].

He would have reason to be grateful for it, since there was much else that would bring him disquiet and distress during these continuing months overseas. Perhaps his most unfailing source of anxious distraction was shared with all of the regiment: how soon could they expect to start for home? Just after the surrender of Germany, in May, the Pentagon had initiated a widely-approved plan for discharging veterans and, over the course of the summer, its administrators had been more than meeting the plan's quotas[BestYrs, 23]. But Pentagon planning rested on the assumption that the surrender of the Japanese would not come for a full eighteen months after the fall of Germany, so that when it came instead in barely three an administrative overload developed that would grow, by the first of the year, into something close to pandemonium.

For now, though, the carefully worded official estimates in mid-September suggested to Norman that he could himself hope to

leave Japan sometime in March of 1946, and could in any case be quite confident of being back in the States by summer[nb9/1/45]. As a unit, his regiment was scheduled to be sent home somewhat earlier than this, but really long-term veterans in the 112th were being selected out for return on something like a weekly basis, while enlisted men much younger in service than Norman began joining him in recon as replacements. In the context of this movement, rated non-commissioned officers began to disappear, and the question that he had long ago tried to erase from his mind came back to trouble him: Private First Class Norman Mailer, proud of his stripe and of his record as a rifleman in the field, began thinking about rising in the ranks.

It was a fatal thought. What modest success he had shown as a soldier was in the special conditions of the field, alive there to his responsibilities as a member of a squad on patrol, honorably exhausted with his comrades when the grueling day was done. As soon as recon joined the troop in garrison on Luzon, he had tried to legitimize his inability to respect the chickenshit requirements by volunteering to train for that hazardous scouting assignment to escape it. But when he was rejected as a volunteer he might have got the message about his questionable record as a garrison-soldier in the Philippines and before. Now, in Japan, it was again as a garrison soldier that he would be reviewed for possible promotion, and it required some self-delusion for him to suppose that the results would be any different. Indeed, precisely

to avoid garrison routine in Japan, he had almost immediately volunteered for another assignment that would, as he explained to his family, get him out of "all details, all inspections, all training (naturally the 112th still has classes on weapons and gas mask drills.)"

Along with another soldier, he took on the job of troop laundry man: in exchange for doing the laundry of all the platoons in the troop, the two were not only to be excused from all other assignments, but would each be paid a cash premium which Norman estimated (unrealistically) at \$30 to \$35 a week. In his letters home Norman had remarked frequently on his various strategies for escaping the daily assignments that came his way in garrison, and on the present occasion he freely acknowledged that actually carrying out the laundry job would be a discipline for him, "for I have fucked-off on any work I detested in the army for quite some time now[9/15/45]." Yet, acknowledging this frankly, he seems not to have understood that in the eyes of his non-coms his accepting the laundry job might well amount to little more than a fairly fortunate solution to their problem of finally getting him to do some work. They would not likely have seen it as evidence that they should recommend him for a promotion, and in fact they made no such recommendation.

The laundry job, whatever its apparent advantages, proved to be enormously hard work and brought a cash return of only about half of what Norman had expected. He sent the money to Bea, to be

added to their postwar savings account (now approaching \$3,000, not including War Bonds) and when the month's promotion list showed that he had been passed over for a rating in recon, he angrily looked elsewhere for assignment. Brushing aside an opportunity to edit the post newspaper ("a seven-day-a-week job") he set off in quite a different direction. The turnover in experienced personnel was affecting not just recon but every unit in the troop, including food service. Norman had worked in kitchens regularly through all his time in the army, and though he disliked Kitchen Police duty he did not especially mind the environment of the kitchen.

So when the Mess Sergeant in Norman's troop posted a notice calling for volunteers to become cooks Norman came forward, and was pleased to have the unusual experience of hearing a sergeant say that he was glad to have him on board. The sergeant was quick to warn Norman that there was no potential for promotion in the position--the few ratings that were available would certainly go to men with some background in food service--but there were advantages, including a work schedule of one day off for every day on the job. It is true that Norman's experience in army kitchens was confined to the lowly level of the K.P.--he certainly had a great deal of that--but he was confident that he would be able to learn how to cook, and he liked the idea of working at something as a kind of craftsman. Certainly he was pleased to be able to escape the embarrassment in recon of being outranked by raw

replacements, but by far his greatest incentive was that he would now have time to address his novel.

At the outset, however, he was faced with what he regarded as a serious problem: he was ashamed of how his new identity would demean him in the eyes of his admirers at home. In the pecking order of army prestige, the role of combat rifleman could be regarded as close to the worst position in the world, but it could also be seen as close to the most honorable--it depended upon one's point of view. No such division of opinion, however, could be found concerning the prestige of cooks: all folk-wisdom insisted that the job was to be universally despised as the lowest enlisted assignment the military had to offer. Certainly this had been Norman's understanding, and until now he had subscribed to it as automatically as to the parallel enlisted man truth that all officers were enemies. Thus the heavily-armed trooper who only the previous June had told Bea that he might appropriately be addressed as "Dear Machine Gunner," wrote, on October 1: "You were proud of me as a rifleman--you will hesitate to tell people now that I am a cook."

In the same letter, however, he explained that not only did the honest work of cooking have some positive appeal to him, but its conditions would protect him from developing any humiliating hopes for promotion in a system that he after all despised. And finally, even more than either of these things, the new work schedule would free him to do the things that he really wanted to

do with his time in Japan. In addition to the question of his novel:

I want free time so very badly. Friday, Saturday, and then Sunday I've gone exploring into the hills. It's breath-taking country, magnificent, and I'm completely happy. I want to get to know these back forests the way I learned the foothills of the Sierra Madre in Luzon. And with those alternate free days I can do that, and I can read. It's disgraceful how little I've read in the last two months[nb10/1/45].

In her reply, Bea of course indignantly denied having any negative reaction to the new job assignment, and while commiserating with him about his lost promotion, she expressed confidence that he would enjoy both the change of occupation and the freedom that it brought[bea10/17/45].

She proved to be quite right on both counts. Norman's enjoyment and even love of the local countryside became one of the most striking things about his record of experience in Japan. He climbed alone into the mountains at the tip of the Bosa-Hanto peninsula, looking down on water that was "a magnificent blue, lined with a white foam along the sweep of the cove." Then he explored on down beyond the ridge:

The trail was a soft one of trampled grass, and it passed through a forest of dark green, so dense it might have been jungle. It wound up and down over the hills, and there was an intense sensation of solitude that I found a little frightening--aloneness is so unique in the army that you're uncomfortable at first.

He came down out of the forest to find a narrow stream of a rice-paddy at the foot of the hill, "ready for harvest now, and turned to a golden yellow. The trail curved along a ten foot bluff above the thin creek of grain, and the gold in it shone oddly and

brightly as if the sun was open upon it." He followed the trail:

Sometimes my rice stream was five yards wide, sometimes twenty, but never could I see it for very far ahead. Occasionally it would remain in sight for a hundred yards before it veered sharply around the next hill set against it.

And then he cut back on a trail that intercepted his own, pleased that he knew where he was and could find his way out. He told Bea that this "is the one knowledge I have gained overseas. I can walk into hills now, tread a forest maze, and come back to my starting point[9/29/45]."

Norman revelled in these solitary excursions, and in the lift of mood that they supplied him he addressed his new job with something like real enthusiasm. "It's hard full work," he told Bea, "that makes the working day pass quickly." Baking bread and gutting chickens really was demanding, he wrote, but he didn't mind, and he positively enjoyed serving up the food on his side of a chow-line that fed 160 men:

I know all the guys (I've been in every platoon in the troop) and I roar at them when they bitch about the food and threaten to put them on K.P. and they sass me back. The cooks like me--I'm a tough guy from Brooklyn (the thousand roles I assume) and I work hard[10/11/45].

There was a dark dimension, as well, but it was one that took him out of himself as he addressed it, and he sounded very much like a writer as he explained it to Bea.

The cooks are no great shucks but they're men and quite individualized. Like almost all G.I.s they have the frightening bitterness that I know myself. They are bitter against officers, they are bitter against women and there is so much cruelty here, and they are bitter against Negroes,

and here it is very ugly[ibid].

Yet, he said, the cooks were likeable too. "I have found that the credit side of nearly all men is not in any goodness they possess but in some charm or idiosyncrasy." Bea had, earlier, suggested to Norman that his attitude toward Filipinos revealed an element of unconscious prejudice, and in discussing the question he had acknowledged some truth to the charge, explaining that the ongoing human conditions of army life, especially in the field but actually anywhere, worked to erode tolerance and moral sensibility[nb7/26;8/21/45]. He developed the point much further here, using their correspondence as he had so often done as a kind of writer's memo-pad. He was writing of a Chicago gang-rape that a fellow cook described to him:

I'll tell you about it if you remind me, for I shall not forget it. But it was brutal, baby, inconceivably so. Indeed, the wonder is that I was startled by it. I have seen so many brutalities, heard of so many more. Whores are bullied out of their ass every day in the week, Negroes are shot by MP's on the smallest pretext. Remind me that I have a story here. And a story of York and the whore he fucked twice before an audience. You and I are awfully healthy, baby. It took the army to show me that[10/11/45].

Norman indicated that one of the reasons that he became a cook was the time it would give him for reading, and he was right to recall that his once prodigious appetite for books had faded since he got to Japan--indeed it quite understandably began fading in early August, when his attention was commanded by the news of the A-Bomb, the cease-fire, and then the hasty transplant of the regiment to its present location. The last text he mentioned

having looked at in the Philippines was The Decline of the West, and it was this tome to which he returned with his new-found leisure, noting that after considerable effort he was still just halfway through the First Book. The only earlier reading in Japan that he recorded was the 1940 best seller The Ox Bow Incident, read in a single sitting in mid-September. He called it "a perfect novel," and especially credited Walter van Tilburg Clark's profound insight into the individual and group psychology of Southwestern American men, so many of whom were to be found in the 112th. Like a great many other things he read during his time in the army, Norman used Clark's story to take himself to the drawing board of his own work--his novel, now actively in a state of conception.¹

He did the same thing, but more insistently, with Jules Romains' Verdun (1939), read in mid-October, and James Ramsey Ullman's 1945 Book-of-the-Month selection, The White Tower. In the case of the Romains--"which was a helluva good novel, and a stimulating one for it set my brain to churning up new ideas again, and more important made me feel like writing once more"--Norman's commentary was completely admiring:

¹ Just about this time he heard from Berta Kaslow, who had followed his instructions to put "Transit" on the shelf for now. She informed him that she was leaving New York and moving to Hollywood to try her luck as an agent in the world of movie-making. She passed his account along to Helen Strauss, another William Morris agent in New York, but after some further exploration Norman decided to proceed without the services of a agent--at least for the time being. On June 3, 1946, he would co-sign a letter of mutual release with the Morris Agency.

The thing about Verdun is its magnificence as a war novel. I've always heard of Romains as a Humanist, a liberal with the Mann kind of optimism, and I've dismissed him as such. But if he does believe in a better world it is not in this book. There is the deep pessimism that comes always from regarding war too closely, and beyond that a universality about it which if the names and the idiom had been changed, could have been a novel of Americans in this war[nb10/18/45].

In clear stages, Norman moved from the world of the novel to his own world, which he used, here and always, as the measure for determining literary relevance:

One scene--the end of a long infantry march where a battalion comes into sight of Verdun at midnight and sees the city afire--is quite magnificent. There is so very much of the exhaustion-nausea, and with it the curious exaltation that war gives when one beholds it as a spectacle[ibid].

Norman explained to Bea that the novel's main character "thinks a little like me--I felt close to many of his observations, and the talk he has with [his friend], toward the end was brilliant for me--perhaps because I have just gone through a war."

Going on to say that the French novel had set him to re-examining the conception he had been working on for his own, Norman's letter records the story of a card game that he wanted to build into his book, along with a scene in which a sergeant shoots an attacking Japanese soldier in order to save one of his own. Since late September Norman had resumed active planning for his novel, starting with a vivid description of the actual explosion of a large Japanese ammunition dump in his Tateyama barracks area on September 20--he wanted to preserve such serendipitous reality for good fictional use--and going on with symbolism ideas, plotting devices, and more casting-ideas for transforming various

real soldiers into novel characters. "I can make this a good novel," he told his wife, "I know men so much better in their particulars now."²

Norman addressed his novel while apparently doing many other things--hiking, working at his job in the kitchen, writing love letters to Bea--but the activity that most consistently put him in touch with it was reading novels by other people. An important example of this is his response to The White Tower, though he judged this novel to be, unlike Verdun, a failure in its own terms. He characterized it for Bea as being "about a mountain in Europe which impels five or six people to climb it." Norman's own novel-in-embryo would require soldiers to do some serious climbing, and so "naturally I was interested in anything which had to do with a symbolic mountain." Deeply as he was drawn into the book's detailed presentation of the discipline of climbing, he rejected the novel otherwise, making in the process an interesting comparison with his own much-criticized "Transit to Narcissus":

Everything about this White Tower is spurious, cheaply felt and the cheapness embedded in language which is too elegant. Indeed I think this was the trouble with Transit, why it was a romantic novel in the worst sense of the word. It had not characters but idea-symbols with faces & I don't believe you can work that way[nb11/12/45].

²These matters are to be found in letters to Bea of September 20, and 25 (approximately dated), and October 3, and 7, as well as the October 18 letter about Verdun. After he was discharged and at home actually composing his novel, he selected out two pages from the Verdun letter, along with the texts of all the others, and used them in his process of composition for The Naked and the Dead.

Two days later, having finished reading *Tower*, he wrote about it again, now completely brushing aside its artistic pretensions while being still more drawn to its adventure:

As you might have expected, I am infatuated now with mountain climbing. The *White Tower* was an awful novel, but its descriptions of mountain climbing caught me, and I know I want to do it. Indeed I read as a ten year old might read an adventure novel, fuming at the love interruptions (what an awful love story in there) and impatient for the climbing to start again[nb11/14/45].

The practical realities of climbing were the elements in the work that Norman found reliable, and their most immediate effect was to lead him directly back into his own novel-planning, requiring him to rethink "some thorns of probability in my novel:"

I must reduce the scale of my mountain range for I cannot have snow, or too improbable ascents. My G.I.s with their M-1's and grenades & rations and ponchos, with their diarrhea and jungle rot and clap, malaria & dengue would not get far at all in a tropic sun, and they would not carry mountain tools. The range will still be high, fabulously high for them, but it must be after all, a minor series of mountains[11/14/45].

In its earliest incarnation, Norman's "Ridge Novel" plan envisioned an artillery platoon climbing out of the jungle up onto an exposed ridge, only to discover that their movements were visible to the Japanese in the cover below: the action was to be their effort to get back down and under cover of the jungle before it was too late. Now, however, Norman had recast it so that the mission, undertaken by a Headquarters reconnaissance unit, was as he explained it to Bea:

The platoon's original mission is to see if the Japs are guarding the pass through the mountain spine of the island where the fighting is taking place. When they discover that the pass is covered, they attempt to cross the mountains by another route and fail because of the mightiness of the

mountain. I have no more story than that yet, but I wish for no more--the details, the incidents will come out of the men --of that I am certain[nb11/12/45].

If he needed no more "story" than this, Norman very much felt the need at this stage for creating the identities of the men who would make up the platoon. Authentic identity, which he had decided was missing from "Transit," was now his primary goal, and he thought he knew how he would create it.

He was going to draw the characters "from men I've known like Amerson & Matthiesen and Martinez," whose separate realities for him were completely sharp in his mind's eye: "so clear & real that I don't see how I can miss when it comes to putting them on paper.[11/12/45]."

What I'm going to do when I get home is to list the names of every man I can remember clearly in the army--there should be several hundred. Out of them will come a few as themselves, and a half dozen more as synthetics of several. (I want to wait till I'm out of the army so that the men I'm with now will not have an undue prominence.)[ibid]

With Bea as his auditor, he projected still further the work he would do on the novel when they were back together:

I'm going to make a table with my dozen or so men in which I work out for myself their relation & attitude, toward each of the other men, and their view toward the mountain. That ought to lay bare the many as yet unposed problems, and more, in investigating relationships should generate story business. This story must grow out of the characters, and I've worried very little about the details so far[ibid].

Norman did worry a little about the identity of a single not at all concrete figure in his tale, who he at this point was reduced to calling "the youth with the vision," but before the end of this month his letters show him returning to the question

of central figures with confidence. He had, in fact, begun

planning the creation of a certain kind of sergeant:

I've finally anchored my vision hero. He'll be the platoon sergeant or a squad sergeant, a cruel hard man (remind me of Freestone & his Natl. Guard service) with an inarticulate tension that fastens at last on the ridge which he tries to climb after the lieutenant is killed, because it serves in his mind as a personal affront. His character will have the frightening paradox that Captain Bligh's had, the cruel tyrant who alone has strength to lead men through an over exorbitant travail[nb11/28/45].

Having set all this down, Norman turned with a burst of feeling to address Bea directly: "It'll be so good when we can talk about it, and really darling, I count on you so much in the planning of it." [ibid]

All along, in fact, he had counted on her for still deeper support than this. It is certainly a signal achievement that Norman had been able to plan his way so far into his great postwar novel project--and he would plan farther still before his army time was done--but his truly premiere achievement went beyond the literary, and was the accomplishment of nothing less than survival. By the time he went into the army at the age of twenty-one he had already developed an impressive inner identity as a writer, but he had accomplished this under circumstances far different from those he was about to encounter. He had rediscovered his crushed and buried childhood identity of imaginative creator thanks at first to an institutional experience at Harvard that could hardly have been more liberating, protective and nurturing. Then, in the context of this already powerfully

protective masculine sanctuary he had found Bea, an embracing female presence almost miraculous in its unfailing commitment to his life as a man.

Both had been sources of empowerment to his sense of himself that not so much created as protected his own headlong affirmation of an artist identity, but neither would be available to him as he risked another crushing, this time by a ponderous military world that--by the paradoxical dictates of his identity--he needed as artist to be able somehow to inhabit and make his own. If Norman may be said to have in a sense smuggled his Harvard education with him into the army, in a much more literal sense he also undertook to smuggle Bea. They had been divided by the dynamics of their post-college relationship while in Provincetown and Boston together in the weeks surrounding Norman's graduation--she wanting to get married, he so appalled at the idea as apparently to have considered breaking up altogether--but by the end of 1943, in their snow-bound retreat in ^{N.H.} Vermont, it was Norman whose insistence carried a reluctant Bea into the elopement. With his Draft Board's summons nearly in hand, he must have come to understand the clear and simple truth: he might not be able to survive the army without her.

How much help Harvard provided to Norman in his two-year struggle to sustain himself in the army is difficult to say: he owed the university a lot, surely, but just as surely it had done little to fit him for the levelling trials the army held in store.

On balance, Harvard's influence in this respect may have well been malign. Bea, by contrast, was in one sense or another his secret weapon all the way, bringing him a life-giving erotic presence that allowed him--however battered and reduced--to power his way either through or around every obstacle. She had posed like some dazzling image of carnality at the end of the tunnel of Basic Training, alluring in her transparent guise of Wave officer, and their fleeting ten days of contact at this time, combined with their San Francisco tryst before he sailed for the Pacific, produced a corpus of memories that would radiate far more energizingly than the couple's actual, in-the-flesh experiences could ever have done.

Indeed, once separated beyond even the wildest hope of physical reunion, the two imaginative young correspondents stored up every intimate moment they had ever had--Dunster House, furnished lodgings in Cambridge, Provincetown, Conway and even their wretchedly beleaguered honeymoon--for the purpose of collaborative replay in their great cache of secret letters. (Norman's schemes for getting his past the overseas censors had been his constant preoccupation.) While he was in the Philippines, he scorned and was truly appalled by the squalid substitute for erotic experience offered by the local prostitutes. In fact, his only consistent claims to masculine pride while serving in the army was his almost hypnotically reasserted affirmation of his command--his frankly superior command--of the inner-reality of

true carnal knowledge.

In this respect and perhaps in this respect alone Norman regarded himself as not only the equal but the superior of the mass of men around him. (His power as an artist, in this company, constituted not so much a source of strength as an Achilles heel--which he had constantly to cover in order to protect.) Bea's letters show just as clearly as Norman's a passionate understanding of how deeply they could erotically empower one another: there can be no doubt that this was the resource that permitted Norman both to survive and, within important limits, even to prevail as the inhabitant of an alien, potentially annihilating military environment. Bea's presence carried him through his eight month period in the Philippines with remarkable success, leaving him at the end of that suddenly terminated time feeling stronger and better than his almost constantly debilitating encounters with the military could otherwise have allowed.

After Norman's removal to Japan, looking toward a reunion that could now be realistically imagined in plans of the most life-giving plausibility--and with military censorship blessedly suspended--the two correspondents proceeded to outdo themselves. For them the language of erotic love drew tirelessly on the vocabulary of costume, and they designed whole wardrobes--for one another, but especially for Bea--that would sustain them through their elaborately dramatic sexual scenarios. They intended it to

be breathtaking and it really was, as on an average of twice a week--each wrote to the other seldom less than five times weekly--they passionately proved themselves in their marvelously wrought identity as heroic lovers. In this exchange, Bea had said that she could never imagine him, under any circumstances, having to hire a prostitute. She admitted to thinking it probable--he being such an attractive fellow--that some discerning woman in the Philippines or, now, in Japan, might have invited him into what could have been an acceptable temporary arrangement. Their sexual fantasy letters recorded such imaginings quite frequently. But since this was apparently not going to happen in real life, it now seemed that they would each have the pleasure of personally relieving the other's enforced physical abstinence.

About a month later, however, Bea received a somehow-delayed letter that Norman had sent six weeks before. In it, experiencing a moment of depression, he remarked:

Sometimes I'm close to going to the geisha house. I know you will tell me to go, even want me to, but I dislike to yield.

Remarking that in addition to a whole list of other reasons to abstain, he would be "accepting the double standard, for I could not tell you to take a man," he in any case abruptly shifted his mood and returned to their imagined lovemaking-by-mail with redoubled ardor[nb9/25/45]. In her reply, Bea employed the cool, self-assured voice of a woman who had been absolutely in charge of this passionate relationship for nearly two years[bea2nov45]. She told him that while she would still be against his going to a

common prostitute, a Geisha House could by contrast be properly regarded as a kind of opportunity for cultural experience. If he should become interested in having that experience, he must have no fears that she would feel threatened in any way. With striking nonchalance, she in effect invited him to be her guest.

This early-November carte blanche must have reached Norman just before Thanksgiving--a Thursday distinguished not only by the fact that it was a famously demanding day to be a cook, but also by being the anniversary of their last parting in San Francisco--and, on the Sunday following, he wrote a long letter in reply. It began:

Curiously enough, I feel a little hesitation,
even embarrassment in writing this letter.
Nat Ellis & I went to a geisha house yesterday,
and I got the time-honored American purchase--
a piece of ass.

[nb11/25/45]

ii

From the start of their relationship and all the way through their marriage, Norman and Bea had of course held fast to their doctrine of unrelenting mutual candor concerning all sexual dealings with other men and women. The fact that up to now neither of them had anything very substantial to be candid about did not lessen their commitment to this principle, and in the course of his long letter about his (more or less satisfying) Geisha House experience, Norman invoked the principle several times. In their

follow-up correspondence he even boasted a little about how his intention to give Bea a full account of the experience had shocked his comrade/companion, the also-married Nat Ellis[12/15/45].

Bea's reply to Norman's report, while notably lacking in nonchalance, was even-tempered and understanding: above all she showed her awareness of what an important resource they had built-up through their vicarious intensity, and of how necessary it was that they keep it intact. Norman showed his own concern about this when he expressed grateful relief at her absolving reply to his confession. The two of them then began, somewhat self-consciously, to recultivate their original secret garden. Even while doing so, however, they must have been aware that a significant measure of the pressure that had driven them to create it in the first place had begun to be relieved. Surely this perception of lessening-pressure had contributed to Bea's self-confidence when she authorized Norman's excursion, and even as they mended their private fence, they both seemed just a little less apprehensive about their fortunes than they had been in the past.

For one thing, they were now being pulled into the festivities of the first post World War II holiday season, and even though they had to be apart during its celebration they both reacted to its spirit. The rollicking Christmas of 1945 was to be a hail and farewell for the 112th, which as a unit would sail for home before the end of December, and, however qualified Norman's

sense of belonging to this cavalry regiment may have been, in eleven months that sense had grown strong. His regimental command, searching as always for things to occupy the troops during their diminishing time overseas, decided to offer them a range of high-school-level academic courses, and in November Norman was invited to teach a class in American history. Despite his oft-repeated resolve never again to look to military assignments as a source of "self-respect and confidence," he accepted with pleasure. The first session met on November 31, when five students out of the ten registered appeared in class (by contrast, 250 showed up for Automotive Mechanics) and Norman decided to continue--on a daunting five-day calendar of two classroom hours a day--for as long as the attendance held up.

He had never taught, never taken a history class at Harvard, knew very little about American history as such, and was able to stay ahead of the class only by an extraordinary daily effort, but he had been flattered to be asked and he stayed with the assignment for as long as his circumstances allowed. He was touched by the fact that Fig Gwaltney sat-in on the class, thus helping to sustain the enrollment. Norman's ongoing duties as a cook began to seem unattractive compared to the teaching, as well as to another possibility that suddenly dangled before him like an ornament on a tree: a G.H.Q. staff job in the Tokyo offices of the influential military newspaper Stars and Stripes. Nat Ellis, who also was staying behind the regiment in Japan, had landed a

position with the paper and got Norman an interview with its managing editor. After the two met--on a memorable first trip to the great, ravaged city--Norman became optimistic, and remained so when, on December 15, still another unexpected development was added to this half-carefree, half anxiety-ridden season.

Norman had nearly forgotten how, during the previous May, when the 112th was evacuating its line-troops from the lower Sierra Madre, he had got both thighs badly scraped when he clumsily allowed himself to get caught between a jeep and a passing command-car. The neglected abrasions developed infections as time passed, and by December these had drained into his lymph gland, causing a fever and a painful swelling in his groin. Not knowing the cause, and being of course apprehensive concerning his recent Geisha House sojourn, Norman reported for sick call and was forthwith assigned to the regimental hospital, where he was pleased to linger for some ten days while recovering from his lymphitis. He spent the period letter-writing and receiving visits from departing regimental friends--Gwaltney prominent among them--who brought beer, candy bars and other contraband, but who also brought the disappointing news that the Stars and Stripes job has fallen through.

It really was a disappointment, of course: he had sampled enough of the possibilities of social life in Tokyo during his brief visit to know that he would have liked to spend more time there. On the other hand, he didn't want to take time away from

the planning of his novel--which was far and away the central priority of his declining months in Japan--and that would have been a risk amid the distractions of the great city. In undistracting Tateyama, just since Thanksgiving, he had accomplished a good deal on the project, conjuring up scenes, reexamining characters, reacting to other novels and even assembling a set of books that he might use as partial models for his own creation. He continued to explore the inner reaches of his Captain-Bligh-like sergeant, "inarticulate, capable and brooding," discovering in the man's sometimes ecstatic megalomania a literary origin ambitiously beyond that of The Mutiny on the Bounty:

It is the mountain which really seizes him. Its immensity is like an affront to the cruel ordered scheme he has achieved, and he cannot brook it. He becomes demoniac in attempting to cross it, like Ahab in *Moby Dick*, and is stopped only by the mass pressure of the other men--the inertia of the mass in any sustained effort. [nb12/22/45]

As a way of setting the tone for his novel's planning, Norman rendered in prose-form for Bea some of their favorite lines from Robinson Jeffers:

Life is rather ignoble in its quiet times, mean in its pleasures, slavish in the mass, but at stricken moments it shines terribly against the dark magnificence of things.³

adding, "I want to get that across, as indeed I must in all my work--I could use that phrase as a guide for anything I

³Arranged as verse, the lines form the close of the title poem in Jeffers' 1932 volume, Thurso's Landing. Norman may have discovered Jeffers in the fall of 1941, when the poet had offered a massively attended reading at Harvard.

write." [nb12/21/45] And he proceeded on this broad, thematically inclusive level of conception by remembering a sunset that he had described in his Sea Barb journal-letter of exactly a year before, asking Bea to look it up and see if it might serve as the beginning for his platoon's all-night circumnavigation of their island as they launch their patrol. The patrol itself he intended to represent a thematic significance which would partake--he hoped not excessively--of an allegory of the human birth-struggle, followed by implicit thematic stages suggesting the newborn fighting its way into a full state of life. These depths of meaning would remain hidden from the men of the platoon: The [focus of the] novel itself will be on the inarticulate [surface] feeling of the men with a suggestive shadow here & there of the deeper meanings of their lives that most men never see, and the few who do, see only at isolated, stricken moments. [12/21/45]

Norman continued to find that reading other people's novels was a good way of supplying himself with insights into planning for his own. Since he knew his was going to be anything but heroic, and would require him to delineate realistically the diminished virtues and vices of his people, he was particularly attracted to a quality he had identified while reading Georges Simenon's Home Town, "which has some very subtly created insights into the weakly Evil, the men who are small of soul & afraid rather than malign."⁴ He decided, therefore, to keep this volume on a small private shelf of fiction that he would systematically

⁴Home Town, a novel, was published in 1937 in French under the title Faubourg.

consult while writing his book, and to accompany it he nominated three more novels from his recent reading. All of them, he explained to Bea, were as different as possible from John Hersey's widely praised, A Bell for Adano

(1940):

What a stinker! It has got a little warmth (which is what the old farts like J. Donald Adams went overboard on I suppose) but there's no balance, a book in which everybody's good is as flat as one in which everybody is bad. And Hersey writes like a cross between Hemingway & Steinbeck which is an affected mongrel. And more, there's no resolution. I don't mean of plot, but you must have a resolution of character--your book's revelations about the people must build up to a more final one about each of the main characters. The love affair is an example of this. I get the feeling of a book in which the first half was written before he knew how the second half would go. And the people don't really come across--there's not one with any variety of dimensions--compared to The Cross & the Arrow which is also affirmative. It's a piss-poor book. I get discouraged when I read the things that draw praise. [nb12/27/45]

The Cross and the Arrow (1944) was a novel by Albert Maltz, whom Norman identifies as "one of the minor but more brilliant proletarian writers that fall in the age gap between Edwin Seaver [Norman's Cross-Currents editor] & Paul Peters [a Cross-Currents drama contributor in 1944, younger than Seaver.]" Maltz, who after the war would achieve a sort of fame as a member of the "Hollywood Ten," had written a novel about the war in Europe that Norman thought striking "because it is the first believable novel I've read about Germans, without heroics, without blackguards, and without a Hollywood underground." It was this achievement of credibility that made the novel important: "He gets people across,

and he creates the impossible--he has a good man in his book who is believable [and] loveable." Though Norman would have second thoughts later--about this and some other of his first choices--for the moment it seemed that The Cross and the Arrow was good enough to deserve a place on his most special shelf.

One of Norman's most striking reading experiences of this time was Liam O'Flaherty's ¹⁹²³ 1923 novel The Informer. It's most useful virtue seemed to be the way it solved the very problem Norman had been addressing in sorting out the twelve or fifteen members of his platoon patrol: giving particular identity to each individual in a group of characters.

At least twenty people have been described by [O'Flaherty] so far, and in a page or two he's caught each of them and made you feel them. He starts off with an intense description of feature and body that makes you see them, and then with one large caricaturish stroke, he exhibits the basic pattern of their action, and makes them move. [nbl2/1/45]

Offering Bea several examples of this achievement, Norman identified The Informer at least for the moment as another that he intended to place on his special shelf of problem-solving exemplars.

There would be no second thoughts about Norman's final choice for a place of honor: Anna Karenina, because "I want to re-read [it] and steep myself in [its] good humanistic mood." He had discussed both Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky with Bea many times in the course of planning his own work--Norman took the two Russian masters to have, between them, defined the form of the modern novel. His dark and brooding "Transit to Narcissus" had attempted

✓ | a Dostoyevskian inner-journey, and what would be The Naked and the Dead was consciously Tolstoyan, embracing the external world of action and interaction within groups of people gripped by forces beyond their individual control. When Norman returned to the United States the following spring, he would spend the whole transpacific voyage re-reading Anna Karenina.

Norman's stay in the Tateyama hospital had given him the opportunity to record most of this novel-planning in letters home before going to his next military assignment. This was to be in the seaport city of Chosi^h--some one hundred miles north, up the Pacific-side of the peninsula--to where he would follow a number of other refugees from the 112th. There he was to join the 649th Ordinance Ammunition Company for the remainder of his stay overseas. The prospect left him wary, but, on the whole, not unduly pessimistic. Checking out of the hospital on December 27, he wrote Bea a letter recording his new mailing address, and also detailing more material for the novel. Then he packed his effects, and, bidding farewell to the Tateyama terrain he has so much enjoyed, embarked on what proved an uncomfortable and isolating all-day train ride to the north:

I had a military coach all to myself and the women & children & old men were crammed into the other shabby coaches like too many clothes in a suitcase. I told the conductor I'd like to have some of them sit in my empty coach, but he said it was forbidden. [nb12/29/5]

Chosi^h--which had "caught a B-29 raid and the core of the city is very flat with the rust-color of the war junkyard"--presented a

bleak enough prospect, initially, but Norman was approaching his new situation under a compensatory head of steam. He had enjoyed and taken pride in his brief experience as a teacher, he felt secure in his proven competence as a cook, his bridge with Bea-- having survived an experimental test without significant damage-- still offered him the richest kind of secret support, and his novel actively continued to take shape within his imagination. Indeed, setting up propitious domestic conditions for composing the novel had been one of the chief burdens of his correspondence with Bea ever since Norman's arrival in Japan. Before then, their postwar civilian life was imagined without nearly so much reference to practical possibility, but as the prospect of reunion became more real, their planning matured accordingly.

Its first model had seen them back in the same university setting where, after all, Norman had done most of his writing to date. Under the cover of variously imagined courses of Harvard graduate study--Norman continued to favor for himself a curriculum in the history of philosophy and religion--he would produce his novel, which in one sense would be modest in its design: "I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol"[t1p] he remembered, years later. But in another sense its embryonic ambition would be great. Norman wanted to prove, to himself and to all others who needed to be convinced, that the rest of his life not only should but could be devoted to the production of literature. He knew he was an artist; he wanted to know if he could make his living at

it.

The more they thought about it, however, the less the idea of an academic graduate program seemed necessary to the young couple. They would have saved over three thousand dollars in cash, there was also a nest egg of War Bonds, and it was now clear that there was to be a real program of government support for veterans in addition to the GI Bill. Furthermore, Uncle Dave Kessler had with increasing insistence been offering to underwrite their expenses for as long as it took Norman to write the novel. It seemed realistic under these circumstances not only for Norman to abandon the graduate-study plan but for Bea to do so as well. Why shouldn't she test out her ability to write a novel? She had made something of a beginning already; she really wanted to find out what she could do with it; and they thought that the complementary character of their mutual undertakings could only serve to increase their intimacy.

They proceeded, therefore, with a plan that had three immediate stages: first, a short but desperately desired vacation; second, a working summer in Provincetown; third, an autumn apartment in Brooklyn or New York, which they could use as a base for their writing. The vacation really required no planning; just a room and bath in Brooklyn, New York or Boston--it hardly mattered, as long as it was a place where they could be alone until the summer began. Because they expected to be out of uniform no later than early April, they would just vacation-away whatever

time remained before their summer lease began. That lease was already in the process of being arranged in consultation with the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce, on the one hand, and Mr. ^{x Mln} George Barns, proprietor of the Crows Nest Bungalows--just outside Provincetown--on the other. They had stayed at Barnes' North Truro establishment in June of 1943, and Bea had already written asking him if he could provide something that would serve their purposes for the whole summer. At the same time, she wrote to the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce asking for other recommendations.

One way or another, they were confident that they could count on Provincetown as their summer setting. And during this time, they could press forward with a search for a suitable post-summer apartment.

Self-confident in many ways though he felt, It would be surprising if Norman had found Chosi a very attractive station, and in fact he did not. For an almost pastoral town he now exchanged a darkly strange city, and his new outfit seemed an even worse bargain. For almost all of the year he had been overseas his affiliation had been with a crack cavalry regimental combat team, commanded and staffed with tested, proven officers and non-coms. He may have resided in its lowest echelon, but it was his outfit and he was used to its organizational environment. Even as it infuriated him with its tireless efforts to keep every soldier busy, and even as he became known as an inadequate performer in most if not all of its Headquarters platoons, he depended upon

its disciplined way of life.

In Chosi he found himself with an isolated, butt-end "ordinance" outfit of only sixty men who pretended to load disposal barges with condemned Japanese ammunition while civilians did the work and everybody else did nothing. Before becoming a cook, Norman took pride in--to put it politely-- evading what he regarded as arbitrary work assignments; so that suddenly to be in an outfit where few were required or even able to do anything at all was for him punishment of an elegant, almost Dantean sort. He, who had railed against the cleanliness-obsession of his various platoon sergeants, was suddenly nauseated by the filth of grossly neglected barracks. Former members of the 112th who had preceded him to the 649th told Norman hair-raising stories of rampant alcoholism and epidemic venereal disease, and he recorded for Bea the words of a former recon-mate named Nelson:

I'm about to blow my lid, Norm. I've had two weeks of it, and I'm going crazy. In Tateyama, I went to a geisha house once; here I've gone already six times. Half the guys around here I've never seen sober. [nb12/29/55]

Finding that the 649th's disorganization was such that he might have been able to lay-low almost indefinitely before getting assigned to duty, Norman all but rushed to the mess sergeant and asked to be put to work. The company kitchen proved to be in such a state of disarray that within two days he got appointed First Cook on the day shift, in charge of another cook and the K.P. staff, and was at first relieved and then positively proud to

discover that he was up to the task. As he told Bea:

I'm pleased with myself & I'm getting confident & capable. It is a responsibility being a first cook, & yet I did not fret over it and I got my supper out quite on time. In fact I like responsibility--you know that brief bit of teaching

must have done me a lot of good. [nb12/31/45]

Furthermore, when he followed the flow to the Giesha House (it was the only place in Choshi that his soldier-companion that evening knew how to find), he told Bea that he had an awful experience:

I had my second intercourse since I've been overseas (I call it intercourse because I dislike the word, and it's a shame to dignify it by calling it fucking.) Anyway, baby, the novelty was off this time and I had a very drab time and a very passionless bedding. I had a unique emotion afterward--disgust at myself and at fucking.
[nb1/1/46]

Part of his problem, he realized, was that unlike his earlier seasons overseas, he now was very close to going home and "patience is strained, & I'm far more prey to monotony[1/1/46]." The monotony inclined him dangerously toward a feeding of "my self pity against the bleakness of this momentary environment[ibid]." Thus he resolved to stay away from the geishas for two weeks, reasoning that "in two weeks I'll have adjusted myself to the barrenness of this life here, and I imagine I'll be able to do without them [altogether]" for the rest of his time. His plan was to work hard in the kitchen and "go healthy, take long walks" when he was off duty, and spend most of his off-duty hours working on the novel. After all, as he said, "I have about ten or eleven more weeks in

Japan, and I want to make them go fast[12/29/46]."

iii

Ten or eleven weeks would translate into a mid-March departure, and it turned out that this estimate was no mere rule of thumb for Norman: perhaps without his fully realizing it, the distance to mid-March had become for him the exact length of his remaining emotional rope. He could wait that long for his orders to go home; he could not wait longer.

Norman had watched and worried over the operation of the discharge system since September, and when the inevitable backlog began to build, leaving him in the unhappy company of men who should, by original estimates, already have gone home, he came to see that his own estimated return-date was in danger. By November he was suggesting to his mother and to Bea that they investigate the possibilities of various kinds of intervention on his behalf. He thought that his mother's allegedly poor health--which the quite healthy Fan sometimes affected as a weapon in such family disputes as Barbara's desire to resume her friendship with Jack Maher--might be invoked in the form of an appeal to the Red Cross to get him an emergency leave.

When this was attempted and failed, they all--Norman included--wrote letters to congressmen and senators, and Bea's mother employed her considerable network within the Jewish War

Veterans organization, all of them identifying various reasons why Norman should be given special consideration in the prioritizing of discharge candidates (their most original special plea was that extra discharge-points ought to be awarded to the overseas partner of couples who both were in uniform.) With Norman's urgent encouragement, his mother gradually developed into a formidable one-woman lobby, directing letters toward legislators, newspapers, syndicated columnists and assorted other public and private targets⁵. In doing this she displayed her particular indignant, impatient caste of mind, but on this occasion she turned out to have been a remarkably accurate representative of the temper of her times.

Throughout the war, an effective common-cause had been declared among such traditional antagonists as the three branches of government, the military establishment, private industry, organized labor, religious, ethnic and racial interest groups, and the public information media. Peacetime conditions permitted these entities to resume the pursuit of their diverse, often-conflicting goals, and a point of particular division among many of them was the formation of policy regarding the administration of the armed forces. The Pentagon, caught flat-footed by the premature

⁵ The remaining file contains copies of Fan's letters to Drew Pearson, Walter Winchell, New York Times columnist Anne Ohare MxCornick, New York Senator Robert F. Wagner, and two congressmen from her Brooklyn district, James J. Heffernan and John J. Delaney. Fan also "ghosted," over the signature of one of her sisters, other letters to Senator Wagner and Manhattan district Congressmen Sol Bloom and Joseph C. Baldwin.

conclusion of the war, of course wished to proceed with a policy designed to conserve the organizational effectiveness of its military forces at home and abroad, and President Truman's administration was committed to a postwar policy that supported this goal. The issue of a calendar for the processing of military personnel back into civilian life, however, proved to be the rock upon which this policy would founder.

Both houses of Congress were swamped by constituent mail demanding "the return of our boys by Christmas," and the White House in turn was flooded by twin streams of petition from the embattled Congress and directly from the constituents themselves. Both management and labor leaders demanded the return of basic industry workers to run the railroads and dig the coal, and the Wall Street Journal and the Chicago Tribune editorialized for the drastically accelerated demobilization of the twelve million-man armed forces. Every command in the army experienced preliminary tremors of apprehension from its increasingly restive enlisted men, and in the midst of this growing expression of grass roots concern, in the first week of January, Secretary of War Robert Patterson announced that the military had to renege on its promise that all men with two or more years of service would be brought home and discharged by the late winter of 1946. He pushed the discharge date for two-year men back to July 1, 1946. [BestYrs 22-29]

The reaction to this announcement, at home and abroad, was

explosive, and for the better part of January a kind of pandemonium ruled in the military and in the vast portion of the civilian population which had already been engaged by this issue. Patterson, who began a tour of Pacific bases just as his statement was released, reaped the whirlwind:

When he arrived in Guam, angry demonstrating soldiers burned him in effigy. At each stop thereafter worried commanders arranged for for him to meet soldier delegates to vent the GI ire. On successive days in Manila he faced shouting mobs of up to 10,000 soldiers and sailors. The Pacific edition of Stars and Stripes bannered PATTERSON CALLED NUMBER ONE ENEMY BY JEERING MOB. [BestYrs 30]

These scenes were reflected in the European theater of operations, where "Military police noted sharp increases in arrests for drunkenness, reckless driving and slovenly dress, [and] hundreds of GIs marched down the Champs Elysees waving magnesium flares and shouting 'scab' at men who wouldn't join them."

These reports triggered, in turn, alarmed perceptions at home of "Communist agitation" within the armed forces, and Congress, spurred on by this and by new waves of constituent distress, turned on the President and the Pentagon with something like confrontational fury. Only a dramatic appearance by Commanding General Eisenhower before a joint-session of Congress was able to restore order. Having just issued a general-order for military personnel to end demonstrations upon pain of court martial, he brought his tremendous prestige before the Congress on January 15. In a carefully worded presentation, he apparently convinced its members--and enough of the huge radio audience who

listened-- that he would deal with the matter of hurrying up the discharge process; but that he would do so only in a way consistent with the mission that had been entrusted to the military by the Congress and by "the people of the United States."

By the end of January the fire-storm had burned out, and in its wake the Pentagon and the War Department quietly tried to meet their original deadlines, despite the fact that the price they had to pay was a gutted postwar military force, barely the shell of what they wanted and what their diplomatic strategies required.

And Norman? Norman threw himself into such a state of furious distress as to recall, at least on his bad days, the most polarized depths of his worst times back at Fort Bragg. For a period of perhaps a month his painstakingly-achieved, always fragile sense of self-possession as a soldier seemed near to failing, often obscuring in the process his still stable operation of novel-planning and, indeed, his also stable situation of responsibility in the kitchen. In the deepest depths of his bad days--the days when he was not working on the novel or getting his job done in the kitchen--he even imagined that a discharge-delay would put him in danger of losing Bea. When he got the preliminary news of Patterson's announcement, and knew only that there would be a slowdown of some duration, he was at first struck dumb. Having written to Bea almost daily since mid-December, his New Year's Day letter was abruptly followed by seven days of silence, as he attempted to recoil from the shock of hearing that

a major calendar announcement was about to be issued. Then this on
January 8:

You've got to forgive me for not writing for several days but the news of the army's discharge slowdown made me so sick and furious I did not want to get it on paper.... Yesterday, the news of the G.I. riots in the Philippines made me feel better if only vicariously. I could murder any General with the utmost pleasure. I hate brass now more than I ever hated the Nazis.

Though Norman urged Bea to take immediate action in the form of letters of protest, the full force of the Secretary of War's announcement did not hit him until January 10, when he saw the details of the proposal, and wrote on the next day: Yesterday was awful. When I heard the news--2 year men home in June, I was closer to weeping than I've been since that last [Thanksgiving] day when we cried in each other's arms. The wildness and the numbness of the days before when I didn't know what the new schedule would be was gone--I was just miserable.

Ominously, he concluded the letter by saying, "Wait for me, will you darling? If you fell in love with someone else, I should want to die." is feeling of being forced apart from Bea was ominous because it required nothing from her to feed it: in fact no mail had reached Norman since his departure from Tateyama, and it was not until January 19 that "the rains finally came" and he was handed a batch of ten letters from his wife. Unfortunately, since they were all written before the explosion of bad news, some of them contained details they might not have included had Bea known Norman's state of mind.

Bea--who subscribed with Norman to the policy of total candor regarding all erotic exchanges--had met and occasionally been

seeing a couple of veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Communist in their politics and their circle of friends, these men were attractive to her--Bea was powerfully drawn to the political left at this time--and she of course told Norman all about it. Indeed, consistent with their policy, she mentioned a few details in this relationship that identified her as the object of considerable carnal desire. In doing so she set Norman's "demons" of jealousy into active motion, and for the next few weeks he returned to the subject often. It became linked to his feelings of desolation created by the prospect of the army's delay of his discharge, and he fed it still more by a drunken night with a geisha girl who came back with him to his barracks. In a complete break from his past representations of such experience, he boasted of how accomplished he has been as the girl's sexual partner, and how thrilled she had been with the experience[2/1/46].

His own ironic follow-up to this adventure was to emulate the many married soldiers he had observed after they had visited the geishas: he developed dark suspicions concerning his wife's fidelity. Though Norman professed to try, he could not refrain from falling into regularly repeated fits of jealousy, until Bea finally told him, in level tones she had never quite employed before, that when he returned he had better not act-out such feelings with her because she would not stand for it[bn2/18/46]. Tempered though it was with assurances of devotion, her reaction was more than enough to re-fuel in Norman the fear that he might

be losing her, and his letters continued to cloud the air with horrific fears of both breakdown and break-up. At the same time, further pressure was applied to Bea by Fan's frantic advocacy of Norman's discharge appeal: she was becoming very hard for her daughter-in-law to live with, and, in reaction, Bea at one point confessed to panic and a terrible desire to flee the whole unbearable business[bnl/18/46].

It was a business that lasted no longer than a month, hardly more, and then the wild, uncontrollable swings of circumstance fell back into a tolerable arc: though their various distresses subsided variously, the whole family was soon again able to manage. Stability got restored through the operation of three factors, the first of them external. President Truman's government, preaching one policy but practicing another, had cast military considerations to the wind in a determined political effort to get demobilization onto a faster track. By mid-February the Pentagon offered reassurances that delays in the originally published schedule would not, after all, be a matter of months. More likely, it would be only weeks--four or five at the most. Norman welcomed such information regarding his own status, and happily wrote to his mother that he expected to be sailing no later than early April:

you know that I appreciate all of the letters you wrote. I think it was that which got my homecoming moved up from June. Because you know, my dear, that storm the army raised really frightened them, I think. It put their discharge program under a strong light, and they have not been able to hold their surplus men as easily. So take a bow, mother.[fam2/23/46]

Insofar as his mother's lobbying had been representative of the spirit that informed American public opinion in general, Norman was no doubt correct in giving her credit for the u-turn in government policy. Certainly the policy-change contributed hugely to restoring his good humor, but his instability had never extended so far as to undermine or even decelerate his work on his novel. The day after his agonized letter of despair at Secretary Patterson's announcement, for example, he wrote Bea a three and a half page letter that never even mentioned the calendar delay. It closed with an affectionate reminder that he had completed his two week period of abstaining from the gieshas, and offered a pastoral account of a trek to an ocean-front fishing village, but principally it dwelt on his energetic novelistic labors:

I sat me down last night and wrote out names, one-hundred & sixty-one to be precise-- the names of all the soldiers I've known since I've been in the army about whom I could discourse at some length & some understanding. There are others, perhaps another 50 whom I didn't recall last night, but I'll add them as they come up.

Originally I had planned to do that kind of work when I got home, but it is difficult to think much about the novel until I've sketched out the main characters to myself. Once I've done that, incidents will flow out of them.[nb1/12/46]

His letter goes on to say that his process of recollection had provided him with the physical model for "my vision-sergeant"--the character he had earlier compared to Captains Ahab and Bligh-- and he described the face and body of platoon sergeant Donald Mann from back at Fort Bragg. Norman then offered the story of something that happened to one of the veterans in the 112th during

the regiment's New Guinea campaign, explaining that he intended to make the experience part of his vision-sergeant's own history:

[He] had to sit in the darkness, listening to the Japs who were forming on the other side of the river for an attack, and having to wait and bear their taunts, for he could not see them, and dared not open fire. "Yank. . .Yank. . .we're coming to get you, Yank."

After this night he hated the Japs with utter malignancy, for they had made him feel fear for the first time in his life & he could not forgive them that.⁶

It is clear that Norman's work on his novel supplied him with orientation during the period of his distraction, and so also did his particular duty-status within the 649th. Under two captains and a few lieutenants, the company had been assigned to Chosi--where no other troops were stationed--to supervise loading the Japanese ammunition onto barges that then dumped their cargo out to sea. This activity was actually divided between Chosi and Onahoma, a much smaller harbor some two hundred miles to the north, and the outfit had thus divided itself between the two: some sixty men at Chosi under one captain, and a detachment of perhaps thirty at Onahoma under the other. Norman cooked at Chosi until January 21. During this time he was racked by his feelings about demobilization, and they distracted him from almost everything but his novel-planning. He also stayed with his kitchen schedule, however, getting his job done and--hardly aware that he was doing so--gaining the confidence of his mess sergeant.

⁶This letter of January 12 was later transferred to Norman's The Naked and the Dead working file.

not only supplied the vehicle but asked if he could come along, and the whole experience turned out for Norman to be quite

satisfying:

The hill kept stretching above us. The captain is about 35 or 40 and in poor physical condition. He was badly fatigued, and tactfully we would halt every hundred feet to let him regain his wind. I felt quite good. My breath was free, and my legs full of snap, and I had the mountain in my teeth--every time we halted I felt a tension to go on.⁷

Norman's account of the prospect from the summit makes it clear that the majesty of mountain climbing, so much on his mind in connection with his novel planning, had captured his imagination in real life as well.

To the East was Onahama & the other towns and miles and miles of hills and rice paddies. . . . And to the West, more hills and paddies in the light and dark browns of Japan in winter, and far in the distance, maybe 50 miles away, were some tremendous mountains, a host of them standing in line and bearing away to the north-west, steep and tessellated, wholly white with sharp, articulated ridges and deep skeletal hollows with dark purple and steel blue shadows. I would turn in a circle, and for the first time in my life I could see for a hundred miles. [nb 1/28/46]

He told Bea that they must learn to climb together:

Ah, it was such a marvelous feeling, darling. Somehow, it seems the most purposeful activity I have found (outside of fucking.) I feel a purity and strength and joy, and a sense of achievement that leaves me happy for many hours. [ibid.]

The captain having recovered his wind, the descent of the party brought the excursion to a high-spirited conclusion:

Going down was a romp, a dangerous romp. The snow hid the rocks

⁷Norman tore off the part of his January 28 letter to Bea that contained this passage, marking it for special attention and--months later---selected it out for inclusion in his Naked and the Dead working file.

which were slippery, and we skidded and jogged and tumbled down the trail, skiing without skis and laughing and yelling "Abunai" (Dangerous) as we pointed to the rocks.

When they reached the jeep "we were happy and tired and merry. The trip back was a delight."

Back at Onohoma, Norman remained for some weeks in a similarly festive state of mind. He was actually staging a kind of celebration in the little mess hall that had, as he felt it, become his own personal property. It was a warm room, filled with sunlight, and he recorded that the very sight of it brought him pleasure. Almost at once, he started trying to upgrade the whole project: fresh eggs and toast prepared to order in the mornings; double desserts at lunch and dinner; garlic and paprika rubbed into the roast chickens; meat pies instead of stew. He looked in one stroke to change completely the quality of army eating.

What he was really trying to do, no doubt, was make the men of his detachment look up to him, thank him--perhaps even to love him. The probability is that he was trying too hard, but in any case such a goal was actually unachievable. Not even double desserts could wipe away the power of military folklore, and that folklore asserted two principles: army chow was lousy, and army cooks were aliens. Norman may have impressed his mess sergeant in Chosi but he couldn't impress the men he fed. Before long their indifference to his efforts began to anger him, he pulled back from them in turn, so that in the brief month of his stay at Onahoma the initial sweetness started to sour. In doing so it set

the stage for an experience entirely new to Norman, and one that left a lasting mark on him.

The detachment was approaching the date of its return to the outfit in Chosi, and some twenty of the thirty men were planning a farewell fish-fry at the local geisha house. Because they needed five-gallons of cooking oil, they sent a spokesman to Norman to get him to donate it from his pantry, and he, stung by having been excluded from the party, surprised himself and everybody else by refusing. Suddenly he was an alien indeed: surrounded by over a dozen angry men, he stood accused of selling so much of the mess hall stores on the black market that he had nothing left to contribute to the recreation of his own people. Since his actual reason for refusing was that he and his past efforts were not appreciated--he certainly had never sold anything on the black market and actually had plenty of oil in the pantry--Norman was outraged by the charge and denied it. When for a reply he was called a liar to his face, he had no choice: throwing aside his pencil and clipboard, he went to hurl himself into the first fight in anger of his entire military--quite possibly, indeed, of his entire adult life.

Five years later, recollecting the whole thing in comparative tranquility, Norman wrote it up in a confessedly autobiographical short story. As he remembered it--and a contemporary letter to Bea [nb2/207/46] backs him up--there were two important things about this experience. The first was that he had really been ready to

fight in response to being deliberately insulted, despite the fact that Hobbs--his attacker--was the among the biggest, toughest men in the detachment:

He had no hope of beating him. He merely intended to fight until he was pounded into unconsciousness, advancing the pain and bruises he would collect as collateral for his self-respect. (AFM, 129)

For a man who had worried until now that his physical cowardice as a child would dog him into the army, this was a landmark development.

The second thing was that after the fight was prevented by a (to Norman) welcome intervention, and the conflict over the oil averted in such a way as to earn the mess sergeant a group apology from his men, Norman started to become friends with his erstwhile antagonist. The friendship seemed very close to happening when Hobbs, a southerner and a farmer, personally apologized and even offered--as a courtesy-- to fight Norman if he required such satisfaction. Amazed and delighted, Norman reached too quickly for the friendship he saw being offered. Re-insisting that he really had never sold anything on the black market, he confessed that he had never wanted to fight and had been relieved when it was stopped. Perhaps he supposed that his new friend would admit to the same, and that their admissions would seal their friendship. But since Hobbs himself regularly sold army gasoline on the black market, and would have been perfectly content to go ahead with the original fight, he was merely puzzled by Norman's response. Hobbs

was not unfriendly thereafter, but Norman could see that he had said the wrong thing--that he simply had not known how to talk to the man. The story concludes when Norman says of himself:

[He] began to wonder about the things which made him different. He was no longer so worried about becoming a man; he felt that to an extent he had become one. But in his heart he wondered if he would ever learn the language of men. (AFM, p. 132)

✓ Norman's self-characterization in "The Language of Men" had been accurate as far as it went, but it left out one crucial thing: unlike his fictional counterpart, the real Norman was not simply carrying out his kitchen duties until he could get out of the army; he was also preparing to write a novel. As novelist, Norman had hardly broken stride, despite the distractions thrown in his way since he arrived in late December at Chosi. It actually sometimes seemed as if he existed simultaneously in two entirely different dimensions: the here and now of his various army experiences, and that other place where he worked in solitude on the evolving vision that would eventually be formed into The Naked and the Dead. Throughout his February stay at Onahoma he produced a series of planning letters, most of them taking his real-life-based characters deeper and deeper into the developing drama of their long patrol.

In letter-memos to Bea, he relates how Sergeant Julio Martinez[2/9/46], the scout, kills a Japanese sentry in a failed attempt to facilitate the patrol's progress; the laconic Red Valsen[2/15?/46], nauseated by the k-rations in his pack, angrily

throws them into the bush rather than carry them any farther; and the pariah character--at this point called Frankenheimer[2/25/46]-laments his failure to win respect from any of his fellows. Norman adds to these working memoranda a short dissertation about how enlisted-man vernacular is virtually dependent upon excremental reference to address any situation, whether serious or comic [2/7/46]. A measure of the effectiveness with which he was addressing his writing during his Onahoma stay is that all three of the episodes he developed at the time, after being extensively recast, actually found their way into the novel's final version. This was productive work for a sergeant who at the same time was feeding thirty men in his mess hall, climbing new mountains and exploring a new seacoast, and was also tracking the army's progress toward getting him back to the States before summer. While sending his memoranda off to Bea, he directed the close-down of his part of the Onahma base, and on February 24 moved with the rest of the detachment to rejoin the company down in Chosi.

iv

If Norman's writing world produced an unchanging, steadily mounting continuum of effort on his novel, the amount of change in his military world would be hard to over-contrast. Between that early January time--when he had been stunned by the news of his discharge-delay--and the time of his return to the outfit from

Onohoma in late February, change had become the norm. From a badly shaken, reckless pessimist of a PFC he had been transformed into an ascertainably responsible, self-confident non-com who, in a company of ninety men, was ranked only by the company mess sergeant and the first sergeant. In returning to Chosi when he did, Norman discovered a situation that had also changed remarkably: the previous commanding officer, a captain, has been replaced by an old-army officer of the same rank who had taken a more authoritative command of the company. Before, there had been no recreational facilities supplied by the outfit, and the men had called the local Geisha House "the day room." Now there were regular movies; an actual day-room with magazines, newspapers and a pool table; an improved mail service and much-improved living quarters for all--especially for Norman, whose living space been additionally upgraded in keeping with his new rank.

He seemed comfortable with his situation, including his new kitchen assignment as dessert baker. Six evenings a week he put in a short shift after dinner, baking "pies or cakes or cookies or turnovers for dinner & supper the next day," as he explained to his parents in mid-March. His only other responsibility was seeing to the Japanese civilian K.P.'s cleanup and closing of the mess hall.

It's not bad--I'm nearly always finished in three hours, and I've fallen into the habit of sleeping away the morning. That way there's just the afternoon to get through, and then work again & bed, and a day is gone. . . . March, always a long month, has been passing quickly. [fam3/18/46]

He took at least two overnight trips to Tokyo, once to order new glasses, the other to pick them up and have a kind of final fling with Stars and Stripes staffer Nat Ellis. Their evening, ever-candidly described, was marked by Norman's fourth and final overseas session with a Geisha girl (whom he believed to have had three orgasms). Notable by their absence from his letter-of-report to Bea, however, were the cries of anger and jealous anguish that ran through so much of his correspondence little more than a month earlier. In their place we hear the steady, self-confident voice of a man who regards himself, in all important respects, as moving out of the woods[nb3/9/46].

Indeed, Norman's soldierly accomplishment seemed to free him in many ways. He was able for the first time in months to hear the sounds of unhappiness and resentment in Bea's life, and he did his best to be interested and sympathetic[nb3/21/46]. He tried also to make some amends for his complaints and especially his expressions of jealousy by explaining that he had not been himself. If he was still a little touchy about her friendship with the Spanish Civil War veterans, he congratulated Bea for her success in cultivating a rewarding New York friendship with Millie Brauer and her husband Harvey Anault[nb3/29/46]. But his most remarkable claims to self-possession in his soldierly role appeared in an overtly autobiographical meditation. Noting that he had changed in some ways as he passed his second year in the army, Norman assured Bea of his emergence from a long-characteristic

social timidity:

I couldn't go on forever having you talk to the landladies and asking for the icewater. I do feel physically stronger, tougher; I can tell a man to blow it out his ass now without keying myself up for the effort. In a way that means I'm less sensitive and it worries me as far as it may hurt my writing, but for the rest I'm glad of it. I did need social poise even if it was of the variety,

'Don't mess with me, Howell, or you'll be eatin' out o' yore ass-hole.' [nb3/24/46.]

Most importantly, perhaps, Norman perceived a recent change in his soldierly persona, wherein he had grown much more like his comrades. "I have the everyman facade," said the formerly stand-offish private: "I mouth comparative platitudes without wincing (I just smile internally)." Looking back on his former isolation with a kind of nostalgia, he compared it to his current, slightly embarrassing conformity:

I make definite statements about anything in conversation without the soul-searching I used to do. When I first came in the army I was tongue-tied. How could I ever give an answer when there really was none. Now I'm comparatively tongue-lazy and brassy. Sgt. Mailer. I guess that was the push I needed to become the Compleat Ass-hole.[ibid]

Thus Norman acknowledged his new situation in the army, where perhaps for the first time he was not painfully divided between a surface life of institutional failure and a subterranean life of imaginative exploration and creation.

His month-of-March progress in that subterranean world was the greatest he had made in Japan, and by the end of the month he had moved from planning to actually writing parts of the novel. He carefully recorded a harrowing, cliff-hanger experience from up at Onahoma, when he had climbed, alone, up and across the face of an

oceanside chalk cliff and got stuck on an ever-narrowing ledge: I kept creeping along it for a few minutes, and then I made the mistake of looking down. It seemed like I was 150 feet above the ground which fell in a sheer drop to some very vicious rocks on the beach. I looked ahead, and the ledge which was now about six inches wide, seemed to narrow into nothing. I held onto the cliff wall, and felt nausea. The walls were of a soft slimy rock that seemed to breathe like the skin of a seal. I felt more than a little panic. It was really a bad spot, and the odious flesh-like sensation of the cliff's rock added to it. I turned around to go back, and had a hell of a time....[3/2/46]

Norman later converted the account into fiction, marking the appropriate passages and finally drawing upon them for his novel's account of the ascent of Mt. Anaka.

In another working memo he revisited this question of attempting to "read" the terrain, this time in his characterization of the demonic Sergeant Croft: It is difficult to explain how well Croft knew land, how quickly he sensed the torments and torsions which had erupted it, the attritive abrasions of wind and water upon it....Croft certainly could never tell what prompted him in circling a bluff to decide on an upper or lower ramp when both spiralled up the disappearing walls of the cliff. He knew only that the one he had not chosen would end in a deadfall--the lower might narrow into nothing, the upper lose itself in an isolated knoll or outcropping....Perhaps it is a device to say that Croft sensed the nature of rock and earth, knew as well as he knew the flexing of his muscles, how in some age of cauldron and tempest, the rocks had strained and growled and surged until in the ecstasy of declaration the earth had shaped itself. He had always a feeling of that birth storm when he looked at land; he almost always knew how the hill appeared on the other side. He had the kind of knowledge which felt intuitively the nearness of water, no matter how foreign the swatch of earth might be over which he was walking.⁸

Methods for the presentation of Sergeant Croft's character

⁸ In this letter of March 27--which was later added to working file-- Norman added to Bea: (As you may have guessed, I have a little of the Croft sense, enough to extrapolate it to infinity.)"

were much on Norman's mind that March, and in a letter of the 14th we learn more about it through listening to a dialog between an eyewitness talking with some other men in the platoon about how Croft had dealt with a prisoner:

So Croft says to me, 'Give him a can of rations.' Give him a can of rations! I almost shit, Croft saying that.

Wha'd you give him?

Meat & Vegetable Stew. What do you think I'd give him? It killed me anyway, carrying that can for two days, only to end up givin' it to that Nip.

Well, Croft gives it to the miserable little mother-fucker, who's shivering and shaking and bowing, and saying 'ah-re-gas-to, ah-re-gas-to,' or something like that. I'll tell ya, that Nip really had the fear of death in him. He kept shaking all the time he ate, and you never saw a man eat just that way. Like an animal, like a coon's dog.

Later, having seen the prisoner cruelly killed, this same witness had watched Croft interact with other men in his patrol:

You know, he'd be very quiet, just sittn' there like he always does, only he'd keep getting up all the time, and walking around as if he couldn't sit still. And then, every now and then, he'd roar and roar at something someone said, laugh just to beat the piss out of himself. I tell ya', I never seen Croft so...well, by God, so happy. He's a funny guy, that Croft. I wouldn't want to mess with him.

Other of Norman's forays into the novel during this month include the creation of a major sub-plot to counterpoint the structure of the patrol's progress across-country,¹⁰ and a

⁹ This March 14 letter--later included in the working file--concludes with a question that will come up often in the course of the novel's development:

"The only question is how much profanity I'll be able to get into print. I do believe, darling, it's impossible to get the G.I.'s speech across without larding in the fuck, piss, cock, shit, cunt which flows so naturally into the most basic sentences."

¹⁰This letter of March 8, written (with a hangover) from Tokyo,

soaringly ambitious expansion of his birth-struggle theme into a five-part elaboration of the metaphor.¹¹ Such deep involvements in the novel as these made him more conscious of the fact that his letters were going to be indispensable to him when he got back home, and for the first time he asked Bea to begin organizing his correspondence to form a file of working memoranda:

Darling, as a little project, will you separate all my letters that have things written about this novel in them? I think I first conceived it back in Ord in October[3/3/46].

That Norman should have so increased his capacity for work as a novelist while at the same time adjusting to army life so comfortably, must have seemed to him to write finish to his two year ordeal of often tortured division. He sent Bea one more letter in March--on Friday, the 29th--remarking that though the 649th was to be sent home on April 15 his own return would probably be a little later. Most of the letter was devoted to an anatomizing of their love for each other and an expression of how very much it meant to him. He was no longer afraid for their relationship nor, indeed, for anything. He was simply ready to start for home. Nowhere in his letters since his return to Chosi was eventually included in the working file. It planned the narrative of the evacuation party that left the patrol to try to return a wounded comrade to safety.

¹¹Written on March 3, this letter develops the idea of a five-part allegory of meaning in the patrol's action: Birth Pangs; The Enveloping Womb; The Canal; The Retaining Brush; A World of Light and Noise and Pain. Like the others, the letter was made a part of the planning file, and indeed the allegory was built into the first draft of his novel. In the end, however, it was discarded.

did he mention that, as the weeks passed, he had been having a small but real problem with his feelings about the new commanding officer. Quite probably, Norman thought the matter too minor for mentioning.

When Norman had acted as mess sergeant at Onohoma, the friendly captain in command of the detachment left him and his mess hall alone. That officer had been sent home, however, and the C.O. in Chosi liked to cultivate his non-coms: in Norman's case this took the form of a special arrangement for the captain's evening meal. The man was a drinker, and was usually not ready to eat with his lieutenants during the established dining hour; he would instead come in during the baking or the clean-up, saying "Make me something special, will you Mailer?"[nb4/4/46]. Norman didn't like the way he "always smiles sweetly at me" in this ritual, and indeed he disliked the captain not only for his solicitous style of command--which Norman thought insincere--but because he was a certain kind of man:

He has the real Army mentality, and more, he's the kind of old fart who talks maliciously about Russia & England--according to him we won the war by ourselves.[ibid]

Norman did save dinner for the captain, of course, but he so disliked serving it --"I loathe the idea, [and] writhe at my inability to refuse him"--that he would sometimes try to be finished up and out of the mess hall before the captain arrived, leaving him to serve himself either while or after the Japanese K.P.s completed their clean-up.

The captain made arrangements for having his dinner saved for him on the night of Wednesday, April 3. Since the 649th was due to ship out in less than two weeks and Norman figured to follow shortly after, there must have been a certain atmosphere of termination and departure affecting everyone. In Norman's case his sense of non-com responsibility was starting to get tested by the captain's manner. Under the pressure it placed on Norman, he seems to have begun feeling the pull of his old, long-familiar state of subterranean alienation. On this evening, certainly, he felt the pull strongly enough to want to avoid contact with the C.O., so he made a point not only of leaving the mess hall as soon as he could but of going straight to bed.

He recollected--in one of two letters written to Bea the next day--what happened an hour later when, half-asleep, he was roused by his mess sergeant.

`Get up, Mailer, & get dressed.'

`What? Why?'

`The kitchen's filthy. I've just had my ass chewed by the Captain, & I want you to see how it looks.' The mess-sergeant is a pretty boy about my size who's very unpopular because he sucked-ass to get his job and did it very obviously. I vary between pitying him & disliking him. Right now, I disliked him.

`O.K. So it's dirty,' I said. `You clean it up, & chew my ass in the morning.'

`You're cleaning it up.'

`Aw, go fuck yourself,' I said, & turned over.

`Are you getting up?'

`Go away,' I said

He did and came back in two minutes with the first sgt., a chunky, pleasant southerner who lives by the book, & is not too good a top-kick because his main worry is to please the captain rather than to look out for the men.

`Mailer, get out of bed,' the first G said.

`No.'

`I'm giving you a direct order to get out of bed,' he said.

I sat up. I was very angry. `I'm damned if I'll lose my stripes over this,' I said. `I'll get up, but you're both chickenshit sons-of-bitches.'

`You can take that back, Mailer,' the topkick, Borchers, said.

`I'm not.'

`You're going to stick by it?'

I was angry again. `You're fucking aye, I am.'

`All right, you asked for it,' he said, & stalked off.

Norman's letter goes on at considerable length, but what it comes down to is that the first sergeant went to the Commanding Officer and that, in a manner of speaking, was that: the beginning of the end of the illusion Norman had been living since his promotion came through in early-February. Two months, almost to the day, was as long as he lasted in the balanced posture of responsible non-com on the surface, and monitoring artist-observer buried below. His own account of what happened, along with his reflections on the meaning of it all, is recorded in two letters written to Bea the next day--April 4--and these are reproduced in their entirety in Appendix 00. To quote them at length here, however, would require us to contemplate a Norman who for the moment had reverted to the state that gripped him during his first

week of Basic Training in Ft. Bragg, two years before.

The army was again an alien monster with which he rejects all reciprocal association. So far as Norman was concerned, the conflict between him and the two non-coms in the chain of command above him had been purely personal, and was in no way to be considered a military matter. When they and then the captain insisted on treating as a military matter, and the captain furiously required an also-furious Norman to apologize to the first sergeant, the chain broke for Norman. All of the things that had meant so much to him in the previous months--the sense of accomplishment, of joining and being joined, the pride he had taken in proving himself--were lost as he was swamped by his feelings of personal outrage and humiliation.

He spent the rest of the night of April 3 composing his thoughts, and the next day appeared as ordered in the C.O.'s office, where were present all three of the company lieutenants and the two ranking sergeants. The hearing may have been intended only to issue a reprimand--so thought the mess sergeant-- but Norman insisted on a gesture of moral independence: he tried to turn-in his stripes. Refusing to allow Norman the theater for such self assertion, the captain instead stripped the stripes from him, and all present promptly adjourned to resume their packing for home. Ironically, the trigger for Norman's downfall was the conduct of the Japanese K.Ps, whom he had always treated with special kindness and consideration. He seldom bothered to check on

them because he trusted his relationship with them so absolutely. He explained to Bea that on this evening they had simply forgotten to clean his mess hall, leaving it in a state of complete chaos which he did not go to see until it was too late. But Norman did not blame them when their failure was finally discovered, reserving his anger instead for those in authority over him who--shocked and angered by the filthy state of the kitchen--were unwilling to concede the inviolability of his personal space.

His sudden, truly wild championing of the sovereignty of that space is perhaps best understood as a kind of breakdown. Norman didn't simply lose some stripes, after all, he lost the whole painfully earned, carefully hoarded proof to himself that he could do a man's job in that man's army and could, indeed, do it through using and understanding the language of men. His disappointment would haunt his metaphors for years.¹²

Damaged as he was by the experience, however, it was not destructive enough to separate him from his engagement with his novel. On the contrary, he turned to that engagement in the way that he turned to Bea, as an obvious avenue away from the point of his pain and toward the process of his healing. His two long

¹² In 1959 he wrote in Advertisements for Myself about his days in the reconnaissance platoon: "Through most of the Great Wet Boot which was World War II for me, I kept a cold maniacal thing in my heart, sharp as a shiv. I would listen to other G.I.s beating their gums about how when they got out they were going to write a fugging book which would expose the fugging army, and I would think in my fatigue-slowed brain that if they only knew what I was going to do, they would elect me sergeant on the spot." [p. 29]

letters to Bea on April 4, written after the disciplinary hearing in the Captain's office, were followed by a working session on his novel which lasted, he would tell her two days later[nb4/6/46], well into that night. He would continue to address the novel in letters written over the following week--having been notified the day after the hearing that he would be scheduled to ship home almost immediately--and if this novel-planning was colored in its choice of detail by his feelings about his demotion, it was novel-planning still. Nothing stopped it; no need proved stronger than the need to write.

Norman began addressing himself to the two characters on his drawing-board who were (as Bea had pointed out) closest to himself in their points of view. Red Valsen--the proletarian everyman figure who had refused on principle to accept promotion in the novel's Reconnaissance platoon-- and the University-educated Lieutenant --who (until his death) commanded the platoon's patrol--emerge as in some ways the least similar of any two people in the book. But in the extremity of his present situation Norman was drawn to them, no doubt because each character in his separate way truly hates the army, identifying it unforgivingly as the source of some outrageous personal humiliation.

Certainly it is this aspect of their personalities that now claimed their creator's attention, and he set these partly-autobiographical characters against each other in irreparably bitter opposition. Red undergoes the experience of a court-

martial--"on a set up," Norman explains, "fairly similar to mine"--which causes him to hate all officers implacably, including the one commanding the patrol. Red is, however, also the only person on the patrol who has anything like the capacity to understand and sympathize with the lieutenant's particular kind of loneliness and isolation. When the young officer is killed, therefore, Norman makes the acrid point that "the one man who might have understood him and grieved for him a little, hates him with the blind rage of the deeply wronged."¹³

"Deeply wronged" is certainly the best description of Norman's own feelings at the time, and his way of acting them out was to go around the company--where he had been touched to receive a vote of affectionate confidence from his sympathetic fellows¹⁴--giving away his few, hard-won badges of recognition. He gave them to people who in many cases had not earned the right to wear them, assuring everyone that he wouldn't be caught dead wearing them himself: the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with star, the World War II Victory Medal, the Good Conduct Medal and clasp, the regimentally awarded Bronze Star, and finally his beloved Combat Infantry Badge--which went to a youngster who had entered the army

¹³Norman's planning letters of April 6 and 9 were eventually included in his working file.

¹⁴ In an April 7 letter to Bea, Norman reported: "There's Lesser, who came running up to me after I got busted and said, 'Mailer, you're the best fuckin' guy in the outfit--you're the only one who's got any Goddamn guts.'"

"There's Motti who says, 'Call me a chickenshit son of a bitch, you private you, & I'll go to the Captain.'"

after the war. Norman even gave away his old overseas cap with the yellow piping that signified the cavalry.

The whole lot defiantly disposed of, he got himself into a uniform with no distinguishing marks whatever, turned down in advance the possibility of a final PFC stripe that was almost automatically issued to anyone about to be separated, and in this state presented his travel orders at a staging depot in Yokohama. There he chanced to meet his old comrade Clifford Maskovsky, with whom he had traveled across the United States after basic training, crossed with on The Sea Barb and whom he had last seen on Leyte. Maskovsky was the walking embodiment of everything that Norman was not: distinguishing himself in basic training, he had been assigned as an artillery surveyor, and gone on to amass a stunning military record. Indeed, he was to be appointed Sergeant of the Guard on board the U.S.S. Grant, bound for Fort Lawton on Seattle's Puget Sound, when he and Norman shipped out on her the next day-- April 16.

The two stood there, looking at each other in that crowded Yokohama staging barracks: Norman as naked in his unmarked uniform as a peeled egg, Maskovsky resplendent with decorations and in the full regalia of a Battalion Sergeant Major. Norman spoke first:

Whose ass did you kiss to get those stripes?

[END CHAPTER 3 PART THREE]